

The Moving Image: Research + Design Process

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ABSTRACT: As consumers and communicators of visual narratives, conducting film (cinema and digital video) research and filmmaking as an integral part of the architectural design process supports the designer's ability to develop and communicate architecture's narrative content. A film and architecture theory seminar and undergraduate design studio considers how film narrative is structured, multiple events through time are juxtaposed, and point of view is communicated. Film is not used as an illustration-in-motion of design projects but as the intellectual core intention of design process.

The author briefly introduces issues of place-making through research evidenced in the construction of the author's own film work, and how that work helps frame pedagogy. In the classroom, while film research, analysis, and practice are key components establishing design tactics, the foremost goal is developing visual literacy - for whom is the story told, why, and how is that story communicated? This question allows for discerning perceptions and depth of reflection. Three studio project themes are developed through film analysis and making: The Horizon Line, Dreams and Materiality, Action/Engagement and Consequences. This essay considers the studio process by examining Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*; Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*; Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and Michael Hanake's *Caché* with student work referenced. Studio self-initiated gallery installation and symposium leads the author to a contemplative conclusion regarding the promise and efficacy of film research and making in the architectural design process.

KEYWORDS: Film Research, Filmmaking, Design, Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

A film (cinema or digital video) presents a story through subjective lenses- that of the filmmaker, and the viewing audience. The texture of a street surface, the building fabric of a city, storm clouds moving across a landscape, the quality of a mid-day sun that marks a house, a room, a wood floor, a face, can be understood as a system of inter-related parts telling a story that we, the viewers, interpret. One may identify with a story's protagonist, project individual desires onto a landscape, or imagine one's own possibilities in the narrative unfolding. In architecture practice, film (in this essay film is used as an inclusive term encompassing cinema and digital video) is often used to communicate and market work. While it is not unusual to use the art of film to study visual framing of place, issues of lighting, or to consider film editing as means to explore tectonic connections, this essay will focus on how film montage (images connected sequentially) presents our world to us, and, in turn, how the contemporary designer through observation and dissection of filmic information mirrors or challenges the times in which he or she designs. The goal of film analysis and filmmaking as a methodology for designing is simply to ask how our collective environment is interpreted and conveyed- by whom and for whom, and with what means? The process of answering this question elicits additional questions regarding context: culture, politics, community, and personal experience. Understanding visual information requires visually literacy. Visual literacy includes the syntax of images such as composition, scale, how content is communicated and interpreted inclusive of the cultural construction of communication. Because visual information is often interpreted through a cultural lens quite different than that of the image-maker, visual literacy includes negotiating what one may understand a priori to the observation with what one sees as a film sequence of images unfolds. The ability to question spatial configurations between characters, or characters' gestures or placement in a landscape, requires that those visual spatial constructs need to be actively "read", interpreted, and re-negotiated by the viewer with respect to cultural signs and the filmmakers point of view. By becoming visually literate, the designer discerningly perceives and assigns meaning to the world, and, in turn, may act more forthrightly as environmental maker and communicator.

1.0. FILM: ANALYSIS + DESIGN PROCESS

1.1. Intentions

I am a designer working with film as the core medium with which to perceive and understand the world around me. A 'story' of a place may not necessitate that I design a specific intervention but, first, affirm a 'story' through a film interpretation. By producing short films, my goal is to interpret place beyond the literal representation of street or façade, but rather consider place as a construct relying on a human dynamic where street and façade are malleable, experienced viscerally through character, and through memory over time. This dynamic can best be understood through inference, the imagination- fusing fiction with fact. It is how we practice life in the everyday because over time we accumulate images, we hold images suspended in our memory, and we act upon those images in concert with the temporal condition of our lives. How does one interpret images of the past in one's own time, and how do we communicate our intentions through images within our time? When designing space, how is the individual story constructed, how is the collective story constructed? How is architectural place narrative constructed- for whom and why? My investigations of these questions lead to developing pedagogy for the classroom.

For this essay, I will describe film sequences from historic and recent works: director Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*; Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*; Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon*; Alejandro González Iñárritu, *Babel*; Michael Hanake, *Caché*, and their relationship to studies conducted in a film and architecture theory seminar, and an undergraduate design studio. Specific details of montage (edited sequences) are isolated to discuss the multiple sensory observations heightened while viewing film. Montage details are differentiated by themes: Horizon and Time; Materiality and Dreams; Action/Engagement and Consequences as explored in the final project. Student work is referenced within the discussion of a film sequence, as that is the pedagogical process: analyzing films, and then approaching a design problem. I conclude with a discussion of the architectural studio's self-initiated gallery installation and department symposium. Actively engaged in film analysis and making while processing design, the studio posited the question of engaging film research and filmmaking as an integral part of studio process to the architecture department. In part, film analysis and interpretation leading to architectural space making allows creative opportunity to be free of assumed prescribed design restrictions. This conclusion is a reflection of the pedagogical process as the gallery installation, self-directed by the students, proved to be intellectually compelling and inventive, perhaps more so than some of the architectural projects often bogged down by perceived notions of architectural practice.

1.2. Discussion: Analysis

Architecture and film are, of course, not literal equivalents. Rather, film observation and analysis pose questions to broaden the intention or point of view of the architectural designer while in the process of designing. Each of us has a story to tell, and we do so through casual conversation, email, or through particular modes of creative expression. In *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, philosopher Paul Ricoeur's monumental work on narrative and temporality, Ricoeur eloquently states, "We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated" (Ricoeur 1984, 75). While Ricoeur is referring to literary narrative, the same sentiment applies to the visual narrative, and to the built environment. Indeed, an image may be more powerful a storyteller than the written word, as it is 'physical' evidence of a life lived, of flesh made visible by means of light on celluloid or projected through digital bits. And a physical construct simultaneously tells the story of its inhabitants and its own story as an object built of a time existing through time. History, ecology, culture, politics, economics, human psychology, materiality are leading characters in architecture's narrative plot.

2.0. THEME: THE HORIZON LINE AND TIME

From the Studio Brief: Create a short film. Use your own footage with archival footage to explore the *Horizon Line*. Consider: *Personal Space / Public Place*; *Cultural Space*; *Physical Space / Place*; *Emotional Space*; *Perspective defined by a frame / a boundary*; *A view outward defined by its opposite and vice-versa*

2.1. Films and Project Response

Theoretical implications of film montage (images sequenced through time) have been well considered since the early twentieth century. Russian director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein in his essay *A Dialectic Approach to Film Form* coined the term 'montage' or the assembly of images. Gilles Deleuze's work *Cinema 1* and, especially, *Cinema 2*, a rich inclusive discussion of filmmakers such as Eisenstein, Rosellini, Hitchcock, Goddard, Resnais considers how time and image may be negotiated. Deleuze's discussion necessitates the reader view the work of filmmakers noted. I am still journeying through Deleuze's volumes and films. For this section "The Horizon Line and Time", I will discuss a sequence from two very different films: *Days of Heaven*, directed by Terence Malick, and director Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, with respect to plot, camera techniques and time in each film's narrative structure.

2.2. Days of Heaven

Circa 1910: Itinerant workers travel from Chicago to the Texas panhandle during harvest season. Lovers Bill (Richard Gere) and Abby (Brooke Adams) pretend to be brother and sister to ingratiate them to a wealthy farmer (Sam Shepard). The film's narrator Linda (Linda Manz), Bill's sister, tells the story of these events that have past. For the viewer, events unfold through one character's point of view. We could consider, as the fictional character Linda perceives and conveys the narrative plot, the filmmaker may indeed be just a conduit for her story. Malick's careful visual and aural articulation of the landscape results in far shots (wide expanse with deep perspective) to close detail: the sound of tall wheat swaying plains, a red evening sky, grouse crunching long stalks and earth beneath their feet, the growth of a flower from seedling to full bloom. The camera's focus on specific elements in the environment highlights the relationship the viewer has to the environment depicted. The horizon is a literal horizon; the camera position underscores the vastness of landscape as the horizon 'line' cuts the screen frame often in equal parts. The landscape's endlessness is a metaphor for the characters desire for freedom and, simultaneously, the endless terror of their less than ethical predilections. In Figure 1, migrant workers arrive via wagon and pass through the gateway of the farm. The physical horizon is seen in the background; the filmic horizon line is held at the center of the frame. The camera tracks the wagon train. The wagon train moves towards the right of the frame as the camera tracks toward the left enabling the sense that the horizon is stretching beyond the screen frame or boundary.



Figure 1: *Days of Heaven*, Terrence Malick. (The Criterion Collection, Paramount Pictures, 1978)

In the last frame of Figure 1 the farm gateway dissolves as the farmer's mansion appears (an editing transition or cross-dissolve). In the endless landscape of wheat stalks, the farmer's Victorian house sits slightly above the rest of the land, and is usually centered in the frame. Media historian Anne Friedberg in *The Mobile and Virtual Gaze in Modernity*, referencing Michel Foucault's work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, discusses Jeremy Bentham's 1791 panopticon device, an eight-sided space (often a tower) in which the center sits an overseer, unseen from those jailed. The overseer sees everything—a relationship that establishes power through surveillance. In *Days of Heaven*, the farmer visually sees everything from his central perch, but he does not *perceive* the real intention of the two lovers.

Malick's handling of the landscape functions at multiple scales: the materiality of the landscape, and the landscape as metaphor for the protagonist's perceptions and actions. As the narrative plot continues, the farmer discovers the ruse of Bill, Abby and Linda. As locusts consume the farmer's wheat crop (Fig. 2.), the farmer starts a fire to stop the locust plague that will, of course, destroy his land. The last shots of the fire sequence present a band of orange yellow fire at the horizon line. The Horizon Line holds the promise of freedom but is imbued with each character's ambition destroying land and lives. Purposeful framing and camera movement may be fairly obvious, but the number of subjects or objects that move back and forth across the frame and against the direction in which the camera is tracking heightens our sensitivity to the multiple layers of the narrative plot that includes the landscape as a prime character.



Figure 2: *Days of Heaven*, Terrence Malick. Source: (The Criterion Collection, Paramount Pictures, 1978)

2.3. Hiroshima Mon Amour

Film is a temporal medium as is architecture. Place is experienced through time; architectural materials change through time. In a film narrative, time and memory depicted enables an audience to experience multiple events unfolding in the present-time, or, simultaneously, in the past, or future.

Director Alain Resnais' 1959 "Hiroshima Mon Amour", with a sparse and beautiful script written by Marguerite Duras, is one of the first of the New Wave French Films developed in the 1960's. The film takes

place in Hiroshima, Japan, and addresses the horrors of the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing and, simultaneously, the tragedy of a woman caught in the European War Theatre during World War Two. Lui (Eiji Okada), a married Japanese architect, and, Elle (Emmanuele Riva), a French actress from Nevers, France become lovers while Elle is in Hiroshima to act in a peace film. Both characters (He and She in English) are caught in their own personal history and remembrances while experiencing each other in the present moment. Each character threads the present through his or her past. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is one of the first films where different points in time and place are juxtaposed seamlessly without dialogue pronouncement from a character. The audience negotiates a different landscape from the previous one seen as Resnais sequences Nevers with Hiroshima. Lui and Elle refer to each other with their respective place names: she to he, "Hiroshima", Lui to Elle, "Nevers". In *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze asks of their relationship "Is this not the way for each of them to forget his or her own memory, and make a memory for two, as if memory was now becoming world, detaching itself from their persons?" (Deleuze 2003, 118). Here the Horizon line is an internal construction moving through remembrance, through time- the Horizon has a z dimension to the screens literal flattened dimension. Resnais uses tracking as a means to depict remembrance as a fluid continuum, as a spatial construct. As the characters' voice over spoken in the present (of cinematic time or film-time) calls out the place name of the other, Deleuze refers to these memories as sheets of the past, and Resnais tracking shots as "continuums, circuits of variable speeds" (Deleuze 2003,119). Each character's experiences are not in chronological order as remembrances move forward to the present, and the present is experienced via the past. In this way, experience or events are continuously transformed- they are elastic.



Figure 3: *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Alain Resnais. Stills from a sequence. Left frame: Hiroshima; Far right frame: Nevers. Source: (The Criterion Collection, Paramount Pictures, 1959)

Architecture student (Fig. 4) addresses issues of time as well as materiality in his video installation. Two monitors are placed facing each other. Each monitor presents a film of a person speaking. The characters, in separate films /monitors, each speaks a language the other does not understand. The films are viewed through a sheet of ice placed over the monitor. The ice slowly melts through the time of the installation presentation. At first, context and content are the same: the image is blurred, and communication between the two is strained. As the ice melts, images become clearer, and, over time, gestures, tonal nuance become familiar territory for the two characters as they begin to understand each other.



Figure 4: Student Work; left and middle: Video viewed through sheets of ice; Right: Video Installation (2009)

3.0. THEME: MATERIALITY AND DREAMS

Studio Brief: An element of the first film, The Horizon Line, is further developed. As a point of departure, consider two characters (literal or abstract) engaged with perceptual illusion and emotional resonance and/or illusion and cultural expectations. Create a short film and a series of study models (4-D: 3-D+time).

How we observe and interpret our experience while viewing a film is not a passive engagement but an active one as we negotiate our point of view with the point of view of the filmmaker. Film theory discourse regarding the cinematic "gaze"- the objectification of the subject (more pronounced regarding gender roles)

on the screen addresses society's power politics. Through camera angle and placement on the screen, the subject places, us, the viewer, directly in that power discourse. When a subject is filmed depicting a vulnerable condition, we are often voyeurs upon the screen scene. As viewers we consider our relationship in space vis-à-vis the placement of the subjects on the screen.



Figure 5: *Babel*, Alejandro González Iñárritu. Source: (Paramount, 2006)

3.1. Babel

The last sequence of events in director's Alejandro González Iñárritu drama *Babel* is compelling. It is the denouement of the film's tripartite narrative plot. Indeed, the power of the "gaze" is exemplified in this last sequence as the subject / object relationship between viewer and characters unfolds. The camera frames, at a one-point perspective, at our eye level, a young woman in profile standing naked at the edge of a balcony. As her arms, in tension, are held close to her body she is comforted by her father. We have come to know, through the film's textual and visual narrative, the woman is daring and fragile. The camera holds her at the center of the frame, slowly zooms out to reveal similar balconies of high-rise apartments— the urban fabric of Tokyo at sky level contains and mirrors the fabric of lives living in every apartment (we may surmise). An evening Tokyo skyline is articulated with steel structure and exposed joinery, with glowing transparent interiors. The overall hue is a deep blue while each apartment's yellow glow stops at a glass edge.

Modernity has created familiar territory for viewers of this 21st century Tokyo: steel and glass structures with streamlined articulate interiors of wood, plastic, and metal furniture, each room lit floats in the Tokyo night. At this moment, the young woman and her father are the only figures on a Tokyo balcony spatially extending the apartment interior connecting to every other Tokyo balcony enveloped in the night. The daughter and father's circumstances connects the human story to the architecture that contains their life, mirrors it, and allows us to consider what future consequences may evolve beyond the frame of the screen. Our conjecture beyond the narrative we are witnessing, within our own imagination, is the scene's power.



Figure 6. Final tracking and zoom in *Babel*, Alejandro González Iñárritu. Source: (Paramount, 2006)

Our "gaze" at close up is upon the naked woman, slowly stretching the experience of time passing as only film time can accomplish- through the camera lens. As the camera tracks back and zooms out, the city, too, is caught in our gaze. This is a beautiful and uncomfortable relationship we have to the characters and the city. Tokyo's architecture is not a passive container of events it is a living character for the viewer to negotiate, as do the film's characters. The specifics of the camera technique, the editing of the previous scenes (more frenetic pacing than what unfolds in this scene described which is slowly paced), the ability to connect technique, set, and pacing with character development, establishes our interpretation and understanding of the narrative. While film or cinema's connection to architecture is often relegated to a discussion of sets, or visual effects, -the ability to dissect specifics of a film's visual and aural montage, the camera technique used, and the editing structure of the montage allows us, architects, to consider how we tell our stories through design.

3.2. Meshes of the Afternoon

Meshes of the Afternoon, 1949-1959, is early independent filmmaker Maya Deren's surrealist self-reflective visual and aural (sound without text) experimental film. Deren challenges the viewer with highly personal symbolic imagery referencing Freudian psychoanalysis. Deren represents herself in the film- she is the main protagonist. The mysterious mirror faced character (Fig. 7) dressed in black carrying a white flower appears at intervals throughout the film. One could interpret the figure as Deren's nemeses, spiritual power, or her soul leading her, even taunting her as she struggles for self-identity.



Figure 7. Film still, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya Deren. Source: (distributed by Mystic Fire Video, 2002)

Meshes of the Afternoon does not contain dialogue. Sounds composed and performed by Teiji Ito do not reflect how the object would actually sound, rather abstract sounds made by Japanese string instruments and isolated percussive instruments are heard. In the scene depicted in Figure 8, a key- in slow motion- falls down the stone stairs: sequential frames 3-6 presented in Figure 8 are each two frames apart, whereas frames 1 and 2 are 150 frames apart. Those 150 frames depict Deren at the door opening her pocketbook. The key, in slow motion, drops down the stone stairs accompanied by a loud percussive tin sound. Musical sounds speak for the characters and signal events that occur. This heightens our awareness of everyday objects, and heightens our anxiety as the film montage unfolds. Without the benefit of a traditional script, our interpretation of the film, through visual and auditory narrative, elicits a more personal, intimate, response. Figures 9 and 10 presents two student responses to "Materiality and Dreams".

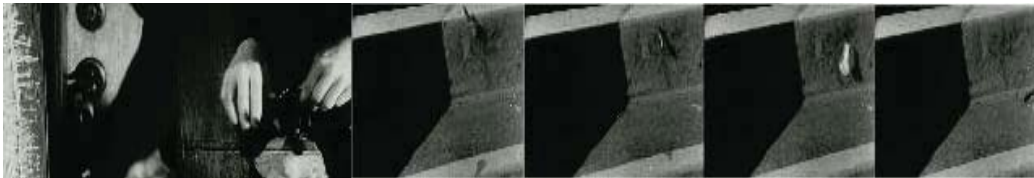


Figure 8. *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya Deren. Source: (distributed by Mystic Fire Video, 2002)



Figure 9. *Self-Portrait*



Figure 10. *Objectivity/subjectivity: Materiality and light*

Student work (Fig. 9) compresses the ability of the self to see beyond the frame. Figure 10, is a thesis design of an art gallery. Light quality and materiality establishes the sequential rhythm through gallery spaces.

4.0. THEME: ACTION/ENGAGEMENT AND CONSEQUENCES

4.1. Studio Final Project

Project: "The 13th Floor"- 2100 sf. Two elements: a residence for a visiting scholar; a space for students or faculty (including a café); design intentions need to reflect the studio designer's filmmaking process.

The design studio considered the 13th floor (a floor unmarked in high-rise buildings) as an addition to an existing campus building. Using films researched, readings, and reflective essays, making films and physical projects, student interpretations included a parasitic component to the existing historic building. Figures 11 - 13 presents three projects: the 13th floor as a parasite resting, consuming, puncturing the building, or able to break off and find another host. Figure 13 presents light emitted in the landscape giving the illusion of a floating construct. However, when approached at different times of the day the structure is visible breaking the continuity of an academic quad.



Figure 11-13. Undergraduate Design Studio –the 13th Floor

5.0. CONCLUSION

5.1. Reflecting on the Gallery Installation, and Student Symposium

Film research and filmmaking informs each designer's point of view and informs the assemblage of a project's parts- a physical manifestation of the intellectual content. Overall, my critique suggests that the final project product may not have been more measurably stellar than traditional studio methodology within the year of the studio. However, the intellectual engagement and processes explored resulted in participants challenged by larger issues of cultural place making with respect to interpreting visual (and aural) information in a story told. Participants learned to address visual work through a more critical lens, and similarly address their own design process. They engaged in previously untested processes- they took personal risks as makers. In that spirit, the studio initiated a gallery installation and accompanying symposium. My role was simply to get out of the students way, which I was very happy to do. This essay concludes with images of the installation and symposium.

5.2. Caché

In Michael Hanaeke's film *Caché* (Fig.14), a Parisian television personality Georges Laurent (Daniel Auteuil), his wife Anne (Juliette Binoche), and son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky) receive a series of videotapes with menacing morbid drawings that reveal the front exterior of their house under surveillance by persons they do not know. After receiving a number of tapes, Georges becomes highly nervous that his past history will be exposed. During the French occupation of Algeria, a young Algerian boy Majid (Maurice Bénichou), whose family was murdered during the 1961 Paris massacre, lived at George's family farmhouse. George now comes to believe that his past betrayal of Majid is at the core of the sinister tapes and drawings, and seeks to find Majid. Perpetrator and victim are constantly changing roles in *Caché*.



Figure 14. *Caché*, Michael Haneke, Source: (Sony Pictures, 2006)

5.3. Gallery Installation, and Symposium

Partially influenced by the narrative plot of Michael Haneke's *Caché*, the studio placed cameras and monitors at various building locations. Spaces chosen reflect pedestrian traffic, richness of multiple sound sources or varying degrees of quietude. Cameras and monitors were placed to highlight difference in scale regarding close-up, middle ground, reflected and projected light, and silhouette as part of the installations place making narrative. In the monitors, visitors saw themselves and negotiated other filmic events occurring simultaneously in the building. During the week of the installation, past images filmed were viewed in present time. While the studio brainstormed the installation thesis, much of the event specifics unfolded during the process of installation, filming, and re-filming captured images. The department wide symposium allowed for a reflection of the gallery events as the students sought to generate conversation regarding department studio pedagogy to include film research, and filmmaking in the design process. Film research and making continues for these designers

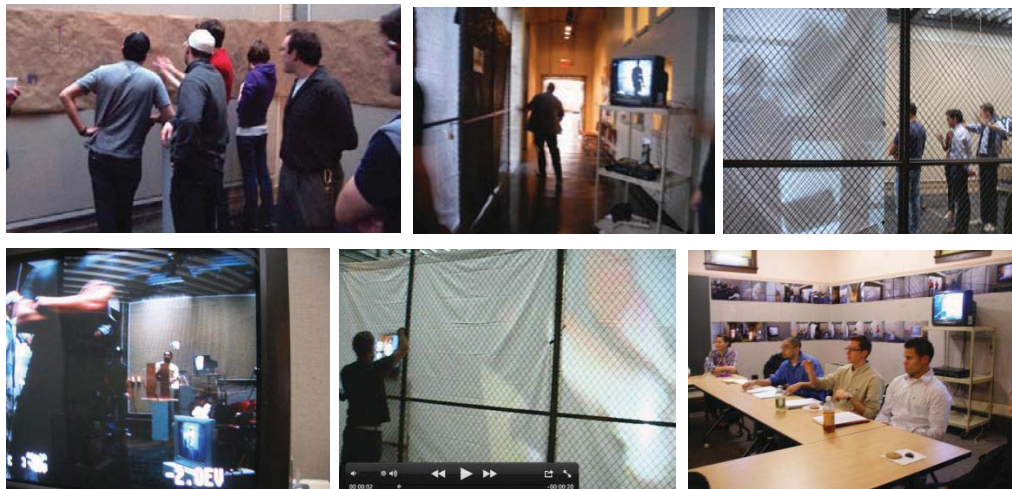


Figure 15. Top left: Studio Installation Workshop; Top middle to bottom row middle: Gallery Installation; Bottom right: Student and Faculty Symposium Session

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